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ABSTRACT

Junior secondary schools, since they encompass youth who are obliged to remain in school regardless of their suitability, show more problems than other schools. Groups are designed to enable some of these students to adjust better within the school systems and within society and to get along better with their families. In order to do this the group experience must aim to increase the self-esteem and the sense of self-direction of its members. These groups are characterized by the presence of many unruly, poorly disciplines, impulsive, talkative youngsters. They have the potential for very honest and meaningful conversation with each other. Most are very capable of benefitting from and contributing to the group experience. Honesty, self-awareness, and acceptance plus the capacity to discipline a small group are essential qualities for the group leader. If the leader cannot discipline the group no meaningful conversation or expression of feeling can take place. The balance of the paper concentrates on qualities of the counselor, training required, and some useful techniques for handling the groups.
 (Author/NG)

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GROUPS AS A METHOD OF COUNSELLING
AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT

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This lecture will be divided into two parts, first a discussion of group counselling for adolescents, and second, a description of our in-service training programme for counsellors.

PART ONE: GROUP COUNSELLING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Let me start with emphasizing the precautions which counsellors in our school system should take when they consider establishing groups for teen-age students. The counsellor should have a very clear idea of what he is doing. What are his goals? What are his methods? Clarity of goals and procedures is surely advisable for the establishment of groups in any setting. However, the counsellor may feel that he is more directly exposed to criticism and examination by his colleagues and the community than a therapist who is conducting groups in a treatment milieu.

Once his format is clearly established he should be able to express his ideas or programme clearly to the principal, the staff, the students and the parents. He should be able to communicate to the referring person what can be expected from group counselling. He should be able to define this more closely after he has interviewed the student who is referred. He should be able to state what might be the limitations of group counselling for certain students or certain types of problems.

The Establishment Of The Group

It is recommended that the counsellor interview individually the students who are referred. In this way there is an opportunity for two-way information to be given and received. If the counsellor thinks that a particular student may pose special problems within the group then he can accept this student on his own discretion or on a trial basis. This procedure also enables him to discuss more meaningfully the referral with the referring person. The counsellor of course does not reveal information which is confidential.

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The composition of the group must be considered, whether it should be mixed or all of one sex. There are advantages to a group which contains a variety of behaviour patterns, i.e. some withdrawn and some more aggressive. There are also inherent advantages in having both sexes represented. However, the selection of the group depends primarily on the need of the students and the ability of the counsellor.

The written permission of the parents must be obtained. This can be done by means of notes to the parents and written consents. The counsellor may prefer to discuss the referral and the proposed group in more detail with the parents in the hopes of gaining their understanding and support. What the counsellor does here will depend upon the needs of the individual situation, the amount of time he can devote to this process and his own abilities and interests.

Introductory Phase - Stage one: During the first session the group leader explains to the students what he expects of them, namely, that it is necessary to share and to cooperate in order to get somewhere in the group.

This initial phase primarily consists of the students trying to get to know the counsellor. They will do this mainly by testing out. They want to know: How honest are you? Do you obey the rules? Can you really accept us? How can we treat you? Now there is no way to skip over the importance of this phase. There is no way for the counsellor to avoid revealing what he is. You may be sure that you will be found out anyway.

The testing out period demands of the counsellor the quality of self-discipline. The counsellor or leader must be able to conduct himself professionally, to remain in control of himself and to be able to maintain order in the group. He must be able to use his professional knowledge for the discipline of the group. In order to perform these essential tasks the counsellor must possess or develop his own self-discipline. Without this there can be no meaningful group discussion. I do not think that I can emphasize this point too much. I hope that the word self-discipline will be understood by you. The word discipline is one which has different meanings to different people. If you are unable to show that you can discipline yourself and the group, the students will not respect you and very little can be achieved. This testing out period may take anywhere from one to ten sessions, depending upon the self-discipline of the leader, his ability to impose discipline upon the group and upon the nature of the group itself.

Stage two: Some of the content which I am describing in this stage may take place during the initial sessions. Some over-lapping is to be expected. It is what one might call an information sharing period. A lot of anger is expressed during this period. Most of the students show tremendous hostility toward authority. Each member tells the group why he has come to the group. They may say they have come because things are lousy at home or because their teacher picks on them. They tend to feel that everyone else is at fault but not they themselves.

Frequently these youngsters are reality oriented as far as their world is concerned; that is, the negative features which they perceive around them actually do exist, but, they are unable at this point to see or to acknowledge any way in which they have a negative input in their own situation, (what they do to cause an adult to be annoyed at them). They cannot cope with the complexities of their world, i.e., the contradictions in adult behaviour.

On the whole these students lack self confidence and a feeling of self-worth. They are extremely dependent youngsters and they usually find that no one can live up to their dependency needs. The more that they depend upon an adult the more that they demand from an adult and the result is a self-defeating process. At the same time and paradoxically, they tend to trust others more than they trust themselves; i.e. they are not self-directed people. They do not rely upon their own opinion and judgment, and when they are let down, as they frequently are, they are very hurt. They will spend from three, four or more sessions stating that they cannot rely upon an adult.

During this period it is not necessary for a counsellor to be able to answer their complaints. It is enough that he listens and that he accepts their statements at face value. They are expressing how they feel, how they see it and one cannot deny that. He does not discuss their behaviour from a moral point of view but from a reality point of view. That is, he will refer to the consequences of actions.

The students question attitudes and values of their teachers, of those in the educational system, as well as those of their parents and the community. They emphasize honesty and dependability as desirable, if hard to find, qualities in an adult. These qualities they prize most.

During this phase - still stage two, withdrawn youngsters continue to attend regularly, they seem to enjoy listening, but they do not express their own opinions. In their own way, a different, more quiet way, they too are finding out if this is a safe place to reveal themselves.

Stage three: When they have exhausted their complaints and angry feelings they feel more secure in the group. They find that the leader still listens to them, still respects them and accepts them. They also learn that they have their peers' acceptance which is very important to them. Most of these students devote more effort toward pleasing their peers than towards pleasing authority figures. Unfortunately in the past they frequently belonged to a peer group which they had to please or impress by acting out. This is not the case in this group.

During this period we find that they begin to talk about their inadequate feelings as a growing young person, as a student, as a family member, with their friends or in some cases, without their friends.

During this time, the leader encourages them to check out their own feelings and to find out if their feeling is real, valid or exaggerated. They spend considerable time discussing their inadequate feelings in relation to other people. This process is a very valuable one to them and one in which they receive a lot of support and encouragement from other group members. Teen-agers are notably very honest with one another and sharing seems to help them all to grow a little. Their support of one another is reality based.

Group members check one another against acting out. They say such things as; "don't be dumb", "where will it get you". When a member is making headway with his problem, the other members are really pleased and let him know it. Basically, this process is ego-building.

These students continue to be very dependent upon their parents' approval and frequently their parents do not approve of them. Nor do the parents recognize that their children feel inadequate. After this process has been going on for awhile I usually reflect to them a kind of attitude which can be expressed as follows:

"It would be very nice if your parents recognized and approved of your feelings, but if you recognize your own feelings honestly for what they are, and say to yourself that you are okay, then you no longer have so much need of their approval. You no longer have so much anger because they do not approve. You do not have to wait for them to give you a pat on the back. You can give yourself a pat whenever you feel you need it."

However, during this process the approval and support of their group members and of the leader means a lot in the absence of parental support.

It may be noted that these groups usually are conducted in the absence of any kind of counselling for the parents. Parents are not necessarily involved in what their teen-agers are doing. This may have to be the case as the parents may not be interested. However, this is not always the reason. Sometimes it is just due to a lack of time or ability of the counsellors. No doubt parental support and cooperation helps greatly and where the counsellor can have family group interviews these may be a helpful adjunct to the progress of the student. It would not seem wise to make parental involvement a condition of group membership. In this way some students might miss out on what they need and on what they can use.

This phase is the longest one and the most painful one. At times there seems to be a need to regress to their earlier form of behaviour and angry feelings once again are voiced. Whenever feelings are too explosive or complicated or painful it seems preferable to allow some regression rather than to confront them with what they are doing. Thereby the cohesiveness of the group is maintained and the group will shortly move forward again.

Final stage: If the students begin to realize a possibility of self-acceptance, they become less hostile, less despondent, less anxious in dealing with people, and especially less argumentative. They begin to feel that they do not need to win every argument. They may even begin to develop some understanding of and compassion for adults' fallibility. They may begin to recognize paradoxes and complexities. To whatever extent they begin to comprehend these "new ideas", they will feel less helpless in relation to others. This new understanding, these new feelings of self-responsibility can lead them to feel less dependent upon others and therefore less controlled by others.

However, such a degree of awareness would be a success story. Not every member of any group will reach this "final stage" within ten months. It is best, if the counsellor can accept an unstructured situation, to have an open-ended group so that a student who was in a group one year could continue in a group the following year if they so wished. Some students will not need it; some would be unduly interrupted in their growing process if they did not have an option at least to belong to a group.

If a student shows any improvement in their classroom behaviour or in their attitude towards their teachers, they get an immediate feed-back from the teachers. The counsellor receives a positive feed-back also. Thereby a more positive cycle can start for them. It is important for these students to look more at the present than at the past.

If, in your group, you have a person whom you would consider to be quite unfeeling, who does not show himself able to develop any empathy for other group members, it might be better if you were to remove him from your group. Such a person can do a lot of harm to the group and it is far from certain that any good that either you or the group will do to him will outweigh the harm he may do to the group. I have had such members in groups and have kept them in the group. Frequently they have been very intelligent and capable. I have employed the technique of using them as a "leader" in order to get their ability on the positive rather than the negative side of the discussion. Their motivation in the group was to become a better leader than the counsellor. Their conception of good counselling is skilful manipulation of other people. Occasionally such people may go into a field of work similar to counselling. If they do I have not found them to be the sort of counsellor who cares about other people, but one who enjoys a sense of power over other people.

One's philosophy about counselling becomes apparent during these group sessions. Therefore, you must consider it carefully; you must consider what you may have to offer to a group of students before you enter into the contract. My own philosophy centers around the concept of responsibility for oneself. A teen-ager can learn to think for himself, independently of his family and of his own past experiences. This is not to say that they have to pull themselves up by their own boot straps. They receive the support and interest of the group. But it is wise not to over sympathize with their difficulties. Such sympathy would only tend to confirm their belief that they are inevitably handicapped by their situation, by their past experiences.

It would re-affirm their helpless feelings. This kind of a philosophy is not helpful to a student, nor is it accurate. Many students have shown that, with the support of a few positive relationships, they have the strength to affect their own lives. The group in this instance, provides these teen-agers with some positive relationships. Often the members form some very important friendships. It is obvious of course that some members will require the support of the group for a much longer period than will others.

This goal of self-responsibility does not lead teen-agers to try to divorce themselves from their families. On the contrary, when they feel more adequate and stop blaming their families for all their failures, then often they are better able to live with their families.

Another important aspect of my philosophy is the need of discipline, self-discipline for the leader, discipline of the group as a whole and ultimately a goal of self-discipline for the members. Without discipline it is very difficult to see how one can achieve a goal of self-responsibility.

What is meant by confidentiality should be clarified. I simply tell teen-agers that they should not discuss other members outside the group. They can discuss themselves if they wish. As for myself I tell them that I shall not discuss what goes on in the group with anyone unless I think it is important to do so for the benefit of the student. If I decide that I should reveal confidential information I first discuss the issue with the student. Following the conference with outside persons I again have another interview with the student.

I have learned from the teen-age groups which I have had, that the majority of teen-agers are basically very honest and very moral. Nonetheless, they do not wish to have anyone moralize with them. They are very capable of liking and accepting a leader or counsellor, but first must come their respect. They do not demand that a counsellor be perfect, but rather that he be honest. They will not respect you for what you are trying to hide. As for the teen-agers themselves you will find that they are very enjoyable. They are less defensive and more honest than are their adult counterparts.

One final remark. You will note that there has been no mention of the kinds of families from which these students come. Students who can make use of group counselling come from all types of families, all levels of social and economic class. Groups of this type exist in nearly all our secondary schools in Surrey and where they do not exist their absence reflects more the ability and interests of the counselling staff in that school, rather than the needs of the student population.

PART TWO: IN-SERVICE GROUP TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR COUNSELLORS

It was mentioned in the preceding section that the counsellor needs to give special thought to his own philosophy, goals and methods, before he undertakes a programme of group counselling.

Primary Group Training Programme

Following the introduction of adolescent group counselling in secondary schools in Surrey, a group of secondary counsellors who were interested in conducting such groups themselves, requested some training for the task. Some of these counsellors were already leading groups. Accordingly, a group of ten counsellors was formed for the purpose of in-service training. It was decided to have ten consecutive sessions, one each week. Each session was to last three hours. The maximum number of members for a group was twelve, but we have found that eight to ten members constitutes a better group.

No counsellor is obliged to join any training group. Participants should recognize a need to improve their ability to relate to other people and profess a wish to learn by the use of this group method. That is, the member is motivated to belong to the group in a positive way rather than feeling he is compelled to join.

Persons other than counsellors or would be counsellors may join the group if they wish. In some instances other groups are formed, for example a group of principals or vice-principals. Frequently, however, the groups consist of a mixture of counsellors, administrators, teachers, and a few members from outside the school system such as probation officers.

Objectives: The objectives of the training programme were:

1. That counsellors should become aware of their own attitudes and feelings in relation to other human beings. The beginning focus should be upon how he is affected by others and how he in turn affects them. Perception is the key here.
2. Group members should become aware of their attitudes toward authority figures and the manner in which they themselves exercise authority. While it may be pointed out that, as a counsellor he does not possess much authority, the issue of authority cannot be side-stepped in the school system. A tendency to focus entirely upon the student and his needs may be evident among some "helping" persons, but counsellors must work with teachers and principals. Furthermore, since much of the student's problem may centre around his relationships with authority, a counsellor cannot be much of a helper if he is not aware of and able to deal with his own feelings in this area.

I wish to reiterate that a counsellor must concern himself with all his working relationships, with students, staff, principals, parents and other community members. His way of relating with others, his way of using himself in a professional relationship are the tools of his trade. The entire ten weeks of this training programme are taken up with clarifying:

1. Our perceptions of ourselves.
2. Our perceptions of others.
3. Our knowledge of our motivation.
4. Our knowledge of our strength and weakness.
5. Our self-discipline or professional knowledge and behaviour.
6. Our counselling philosophy.

Method: Group members have an opportunity to interact with each other so that their own behaviour will serve as the curriculum or learning material. The experience of the group process itself is intended to be a learning experience for all members. Members should have an opportunity to practise new skills of relating to one another and to the whole group. They may also discuss the effects of their behaviour in other situations or relationships outside the group, such as family, classroom, etc. Undoubtedly, comments by other group members will show each member new aspects of their own behaviour.

The overall atmosphere of the group is usually supportive and helpful. The expression of negative feelings occur, but the overall balance of the experience is intended to be positive rather than negative.

There is no particular emphasis on group counselling per se; i.e., no formal instruction. The experience of being a member and the self-learning that takes place should enable some counsellors to approach the leadership of their own group with greater confidence.

What is to be discussed is introduced by the members themselves. There is no laid on discussion of philosophy of group counselling, etc., by the group leader. Individuals arrive at definitions and re-definitions of their personal philosophy in accordance with a growing knowledge of their own strengths and weaknesses and of their motivations.

It is hoped that the group experience will be directly useful to the participants in their working experience. In fact this could be stated as an implicit objective since the existence of these groups is sanctioned by the School Board. As one becomes more aware of one's behaviour and relationships with others, one can increase one's self-discipline in such relationships. And as a counsellor operates with more awareness and sensitivity toward others it may be anticipated that he will feel more effective and confident in his work, and that he will derive more enjoyment from it.

Secondary Group Training Programme

The primary training programme is really little more than a beginning for those counsellors who are interested in conducting adolescent or parent groups themselves. It was decided therefore, to conduct a secondary group. Anyone entering this group had to have completed the primary group. This secondary group has consisted almost entirely of counsellors.

The goals and the methods vary a little. The goal is to increase one's professional knowledge of group or individual or family counselling. Some or nearly all of the members may be conducting groups themselves. They are encouraged to bring their counselling group experiences and problems to this training group for discussion and consultation. Indeed one of the main uses of this group is group supervision or training for group counselling. In addition to discussing their own groups, we may also discuss theory and relate it to practice.

Since these members have been in a primary group much of the method and the focus of that group may be carried into the secondary group. It continues to be an effective way of learning. The outward structure of these groups is the same as that of the primary groups.

Occasionally counsellors continue into a third level training group. These groups may have a different structure, i.e. to come when and if you have something to discuss. They are also open-ended, lasting for the bulk of the school year rather than for ten weeks only. Counsellors determine what will be the content of these sessions. Study groups on particular topics may be formed.

It should be noted that the content of the discussion of these groups moves from that which is quite personal to that which is less personal and more academic. These groups are intended for self-learning but not for therapy. If a member should decide that he requires more intensive or longer term help then he is encouraged to seek this in addition to his group experience.

This in-service training programme is always open to criticism, suggestion and change. The overall programme for staff development changes from year to year depending upon what the counsellors request. As counsellors mature professionally their needs change. People are brought in from outside to conduct meetings and workshops. What is done one year will not necessarily be done the next year.

This paper has dealt mainly with groups, as a means of counselling for teen-agers and as a means of staff development for counsellors. But group counselling is not the only form of effective counselling. In fact many counsellors who go through the training programme decide that they are not well suited to group counselling. Nevertheless, we hope that the training programme such as it is will be helpful to all counsellors, whatever their choice of method.

April 22, 1975.

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